

Citizens League

# Public Policy Discussion Report

Report on the Findings from the  
Public Policy Workshops in Scott County



**Citizens  
League**

*Common ground. Common good.*

## Overview & Understanding of Scott County's Work

Scott County is currently undergoing a master planning process for its parks and trails system. With one partially developed park, three partially-acquired but not developed parks, and a trails search area as part of the conversation, Scott County is truly at an important juncture as it thinks strategically about how to develop its system. This is a unique opportunity and County officials are dedicated to involving its citizens as part of the planning process. Staff has taken an active role of reaching out to and working with the public thus far, and has further formalized its commitment by creating a Citizens Design Team (CDT) to play an advisory role in the planning process, as well as holding a series of public meetings to inform all of the work.

## Role of the Citizens League

The Citizens League was contracted to take the lead in designing and implementing a citizen outreach process to engage the public and solicit their input on public policy and strategic direction issues. This work has focused on discerning the values and priorities of Scott County residents with regards to parks and trails. Staff and other consultants have separately led up the work to drill down on the specific planning elements residents would like to see in their parks and trails, which will be informed in part by our high-level findings. This report serves as the analysis of the learnings about residents' priorities and values.

*This workshop style is more like a focus group, with the heart of the learnings coming from the discussion and conversation.*

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## Overview of the Process

Scott County held four public meetings throughout the county, during which the Citizens League used a large portion of the time to facilitate a conversation with residents. We utilized interactive response devices (aka: clickers) to collect data from residents, but more importantly, serve as a starting point for a more robust conversation about their values and priorities for parks and trails.

Questions and conversation sought to engage participants at a high level about their parks and trails system as a whole. What level of quality did they want? How quickly should work be completed? What should the priorities be? How should funding gaps be addressed? These and other issues made up the conversation. Inputs collected include data from the interactive response devices, observations from the facilitator, notes from staff and written comments from participants themselves.

The Citizens League worked with Scott County to provide an overview of the park and trails system to date in effort to provide participants with adequate background to make informed decisions. Mark Themig, Director of Scott County Parks and Trails, presented this information at each of the sessions, as well as answered questions. Staffers Patricia Freeman and Andy Hingeveld also participated and served as a resource during the sessions.

The interactive part of the meeting was led by the Citizens League. Participants were given a question then asked to discuss it with a small group at their table. CDT members helped to facilitate table-level conversations. After a few minutes, participants voted with their interactive response devices and the Citizens League facilitator – Erin Sapp – led a conversation about the discussion and results. This workshop style is more like a focus group, with the heart of the learnings coming from the discussion and conversation, rather than the “clicker” results. The clickers help to facilitate a conversation and begin to quantify how many people land on a particular side of an issue.

Erin Sapp headed up the Citizens League side of the process with assistance from Stacy Becker. Together they hosted a test run with members of the Citizen Design Team and Parks Board. Using the valuable feedback and learnings, the presentation and its questions were updated and refined before using them with the public.

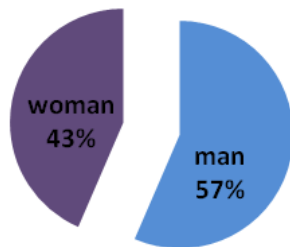
## Who Participated

Public meetings were held in late August at or in the vicinity of Cedar Lake Farm, Doyle Kenefick, Blakeley Bluffs, and the trails search area. Data was collected from 138 participants across all meetings. CDT and other community members who participated in more than one meeting were asked to vote at only one session. They were, however, welcome and encouraged to participate in the conversation at each session. In total, around 150 people participated in the four public workshops.

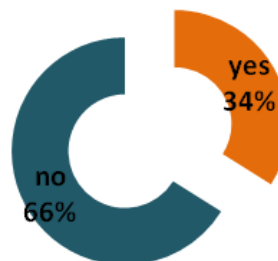
A test run was held in early August with CDT and Park Board members. Because many of the questions changed between the test run and public meetings, and most of those who participated in the test also participated in one or more of the public sessions, results from the test run are not included in this report.

Participants tended to be older and without children living at home, but shared a somewhat proportional split between men and women. These demographics are not representative of Scott County as a whole, and so it wouldn't be appropriate to assume that the perspectives outlined in this report constitute a complete picture. A question asking participants about their favorite outdoor activities was also posed.

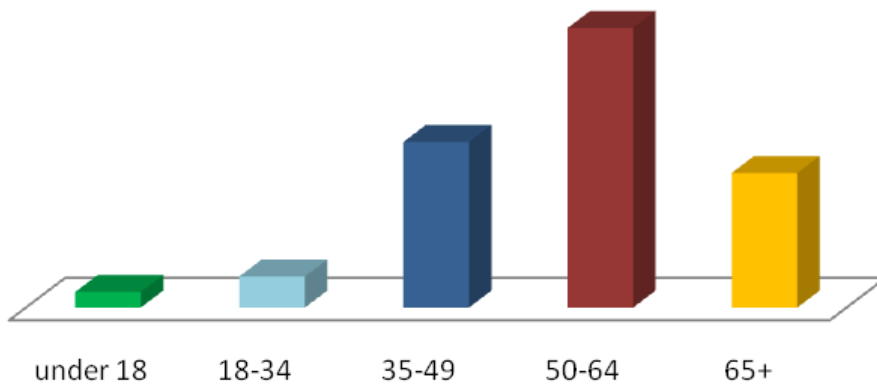
### Are you a man or a woman?



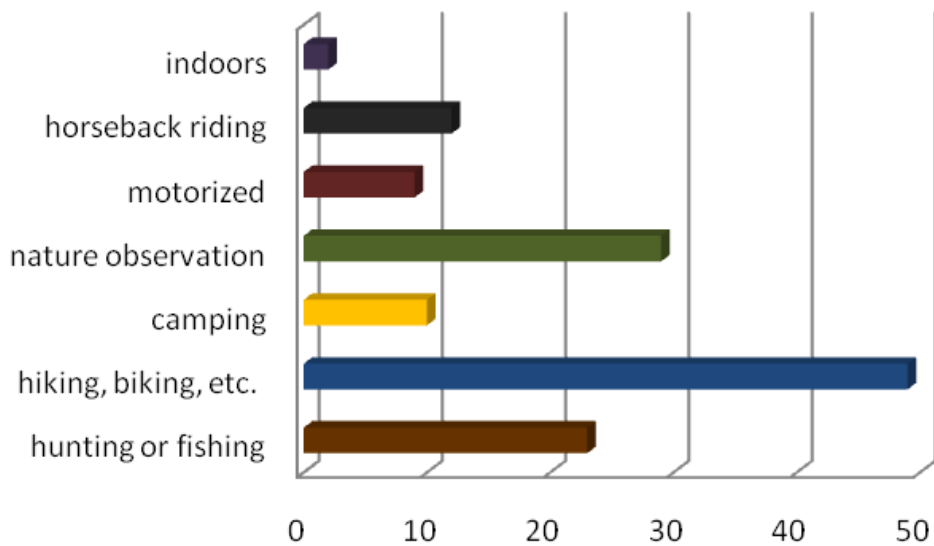
### Do you have kids under the age of 18 living at home?



### How old are you?



### What is your favorite outdoor activity?



## Themes & Findings

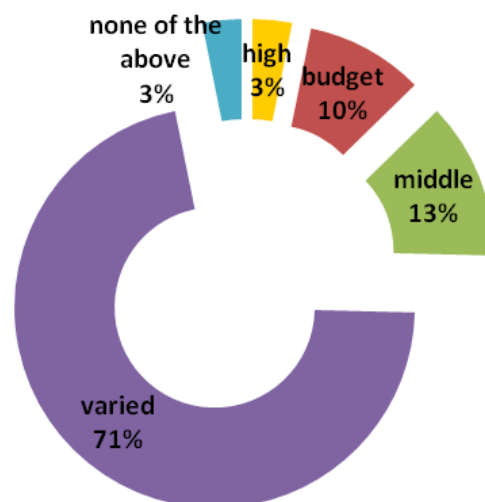
Several major themes emerged throughout conversations with the public. Most of these themes fit within the issue areas that questions were posed: quality, funding, priorities and timeline.

### 1) QUALITY

As Scott County develops its parks system, it can chose to create a robust, high quality system, one that is rustic and basic, or something in between. Participants were asked “which best describes the standard of quality that you’d like to see?”, and the pros and cons – including the financial trade-offs – of the following options were summarized .

- a) We should build the best system in the metro with robust, **high**-quality amenities, even if it means paying a higher price tag.
- b) We should build the most basic, no-frills, **budget** system with fewer and more rustic amenities at the lowest cost possible.
- c) We should build a **middle**-of-the-road system that offers diverse but average quality amenities as a mid-level cost.
- d) Quality should **vary** by site, at mixed cost, so that overall we have a range of opportunities.

### Which best describes the standard of quality you'd like to see?



Responses varied somewhat between meeting sites, with a higher percentage of Blakely Bluffs participants choosing “budget” or “middle” (40%) rather than “vary”, and trails participants choosing only “vary” (88%) and “budget” (12%). Given that demand for high-quality trails across a system is generally low, that may explain the difference in response by trail users. Since Blakely Bluffs is the least developed of all of the sites, users may have felt more of a need to commit to a funding strategy than those at other site locations.

#### **Vary Quality by Site- why**

Overwhelmingly, participants chose to vary the quality of parks by site. They noted several reasons and rational for why they chose this option.

- **Each park should have different amenities to/and serve different users, with varied quality at each site.** This would create a variety of experiences across the system, and create niche parks and opportunities for a variety of users. It’s important to have amenities and activities available for users across the spectrum – from families with young children to seniors – but not all activities need to be (or perhaps even should be) available in each location. As one participant put it, parks are like restaurants, “you’ve got fine dining and fast

*“You’ve got fine dining and fast food.  
Parks should also vary in quality and cost.”*

food. Parks should also vary in quality and cost.”

- **We should spend more on facilities and at parks with higher usage rates.** This approach would concentrate resources on facilities and amenities that the majority of visitors would use, as well as use fewer resources on remote areas with fewer users. A few participants also noted that we should build lower-quality sites where amenities may be damaged (e.g. in a floodplain), and higher quality ones in more protected areas.

#### **Vary Quality by Site- how**

Participants also offered advice on *how* to go about choosing which what to build where.

- **Park amenities should be determined by their proximity to other parks and amenities, and varied accordingly.** For instance, it doesn’t make sense to have camping available at only two parks in the county if the only places it’s offered are at site close to each other. Amenities should be varied geographically so there’s something close to everyone, as well as by experience, like by varied natural resources.
- **Amenities and quality should be customized to the needs of the community**

**and users.** If a park is located near a high numbers of older residents, for instance, it makes sense for that park location to offer activities and experiences likely to appeal to seniors. Build attractive amenities for the neighbors, the most likely users, representative of their demographics.

- **Amenities and quality should also be customized to fit well with the natural resources and other unique experiences available.** With such diverse natural resource park locations in Scott County, there is a real opportunity to offer a variety of experiences to connect people with nature. The facilities and amenities developed should work in concert with these unique opportunities.
- **Build facilities that generate revenue** (rentals for weddings, etc.). Some participants noted that investing in facilities that could help earn revenue was noted as important to support economic sustainability, as well as to make the parks themselves an area of attraction.

#### **Do What You Can Do Well**

Overall, participants at each session offered advice for the development of the system as a whole.

- **Only build what we're able to maintain**, doing only what you can do well. This includes maintaining the facilities, as well as policing the parks for safety and vandalism. The current level of care in the (unopened) parks – due to overgrowth and particularly vandalism – was a major concern for some participants and something they don't want to see neglected as the

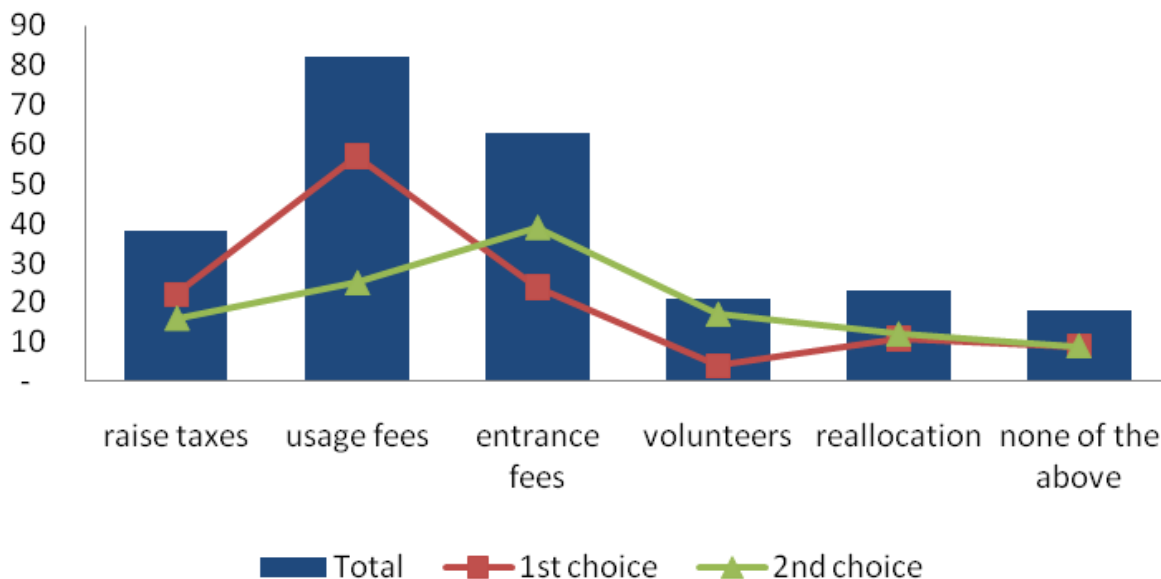


## 2) FUNDING NEEDS: OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE

While Scott County may be able to secure capital funds for development through grants and other one-time sources, it will need to secure a steady, dedicated source of funding for operations and maintenance. With any development, these costs will rise. Participants were asked, “How would you prefer to address additional funding needs?” Because it is easy to tell others what they should do to support their system – like volunteer – answers were phrased in terms of “I” to capture what participants themselves would be willing to do.

- a) I would pay higher property **taxes**
- b) I would pay **usage fees**
- c) I would pay an **entrance fee**
- d) I would **volunteer**
- e) I would ask county commissioners to **reallocate** funds from other parts of the county budget

### How would you prefer to address additional funding needs?



Note: The red and green lines indicate participants' first choice and second choice answers, and each total 138, the total number of participants. The blue bars total 276 – double the number of participants - because they reflect the number of participants who

### **Pay for What You Use**

It was apparent from the clicker responses, discussion and notes that participants feel it's important that users pay for what they use. Those who use the parks should be the primary payers for them. As one participant put it, "People should have the best park system they are willing to use and support." While the majority of support was for usage fees – enforcing the idea of paying for what you use – many also supported entrance fees. They noted several reasons for this.

- **User fees collect funds from all users**, including those who don't own property or are not from Scott County. Residents don't want to be subsidizing people from outside the county, or those who don't pay property taxes directly, like renters. This theme emerged at most of the meetings.
- **Entrance and usage fees are becoming a (perceived) industry standard.** Permits for entrance or being in the park are currently required at state and national parks, and several other cities and counties charge for specific uses (like dog parks, cross country ski trails, swimming, etc.). "It's a norm to use entrance and user fees," said one participant. Currently, Anoka, Carver and Washington counties charge entrance fees. However, Three Rivers Park District recently discontinued user fees.

While participants overwhelmingly support a usage-supported fee structure, some concerns arose. First, participants realize that it can be expensive and difficult to implement and enforce usage and entrance fees. Costs to do this should not eat up the revenue generated. A few participants also noted that charging these types of fees could be seen as double-dipping. They felt that property taxes alone should guarantee them the right to fully use the parks those dollars support. A key issue that emerged was affordability, which is discussed below.

*"It's a norm to use entrance and user fees."*

### **Affordability is Important**

While park users should pay for what they use, affordability mechanisms are key so that those without financial means aren't kept out of the parks and off the trails.

- **Fees should be levied via some sort of sliding scale or other mechanism to ensure that they're affordable.** Entrance and user fees may be difficult for some lower-income users to pay, but that doesn't necessarily mean that those people should be prevented from using the parks and trails. The same participant who reported that entrance and user fees are the norm also noted that "they [can] reduce use of parks," which all participants nearly unanimously agreed should be proactively avoided. For instance, Scott County could offer a program similar to the city of Fridley

*“[User fees can] reduce use of parks.”*

where residents eligible for free and reduced lunch program can enjoy waived or reduced fees for a variety of recreational opportunities.

#### Volunteers

While participants like the idea of using volunteers to help maintain parks and trails, they noted that this is often not a reliable method. They liked the idea but recognized that they personally couldn't or wouldn't volunteer time.

- **While volunteers would be a cost-effective way to maintain parks and trails, it is likely not a realistic option to keep facilities up to the standard desired.** That said, volunteers may be able to successfully play a valuable supporting role in maintenance and operations rather than a lead role.

#### Property Taxes

Much discussion ensued about raising property taxes to further support the parks and trails.

- **Residents may vote to raise property taxes for the parks and trails *if* those funds would be dedicated solely to parks and trails.** Numerous concerns surfaced regarding how property taxes are currently levied and allocated. This made residents skeptical of further raising property tax to support the parks and trails *unless* those funds could be guaranteed to support operations and maintenance of parks and trails. Other county expenditures and/or parks and trails administration should not be eligible for these funds.
- **It wouldn't take much more per house to cover all of the costs.** Many – but not all – participants noted that \$10/year/300K house isn't much to guarantee higher quality operations and maintenance. This could also have the added bonus of alleviating the complications and hassle of user fees.

#### None of the Above

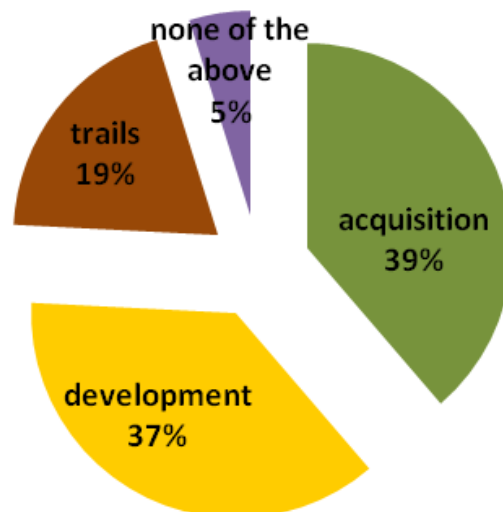
It's worth noting that a small number of participants – between three and five – indicated that the need for further operations and maintenance funding could be avoided if no further parks or trails are developed and advocated for this approach.

### **3) PRIORITY FOCUS AREA**

With so many potential options to spend resources on, it's important for Scott County to have a focus for what to prioritize in the coming years. Participants were asked, "Over the next ten years the primary focus of Scott County parks and trails should be...."

- a) Acquiring land for parks
- b) Developing parks
- c) Developing trails outside of parks

**Over the next 10 years,  
the primary focus should be on...**



Participants at the Cedar Lake Farm and Doyle Kennefick meetings indicated a stronger preference for development, Blakely Bluffs participants favored acquisition, and trails participants desire trails. These differences are reflective of the various stages of development each of each site

Overall, participants wanted to take a *mixed approach*, preserving land for the future and creating opportunities to use the parks now. While users were forced to make one choice during voting, discussion revealed that this was a hard choice for users to make. The numbers above may also reflect that three of meetings focused on parks and only one on trails. Participants may have also been largely rural residents who likely think differently about trails than their city-dwelling counterparts. Regardless, this issue is much less cut-and-dry than the other questions, and the themes are likely the same.

### Land Acquisition

For those favoring land acquisition, they noted several reasons.

- **We should acquire land before it's developed.** As one participant put it, "Land is something they're not making any more of. We can build structures later."
- **We should take advantage of low land prices to get the best value.** With resource scarce and the to-do list long, we could get the most bang for our buck now by investing in land. Pricing for materials and labor will remain more constant.
- **When land is available from willing sellers, it should be purchased,** even at the expense of development. Even those participants who chose "development" as their priority agreed on this point.
- But, **don't acquire more land than can be maintained and protected.** Problems arising from this were noted at many sessions – overgrowth, dilapidation, vandalism, etc. – so the county should only purchase the land it's going to be able to protect and maintain.

A much higher percentage of participants supported acquisition at the Blakely Bluffs meeting, likely because this park has little to no land given its status is still as a search area.

### Parks Development

Most of the conversation focused on parks development, even though it received about the same number of votes as land acquisition. Participants noted several reasons.

- **Residents want to be able to use the parks now.** Much of the land has been owned for ages by the county, and there's growing community pressure to be able to use the parks now. One older participant commented that "I'd like to be able to use the parks before I die."

*"I'd like to be able to use the parks before I die."*

- **Residents want to see development happening.** With the land sitting there, they feel like there's a stagnation in progress and that nothing's happening. Development, even on a small scale, would demonstrate that indeed, these acquired resources are a priority for the county and something that they will continue to invest in for the community; the county didn't just acquire the land for acquisition's sake. Residents need to see even minimal development.

### Trails

While in the minority, perhaps due to the issues noted previously, several participants noted the importance of trails and how they should be developed.

- **Trails should be built alongside development, rather than being developed separately.** It doesn't make sense to residents to build a trail where there aren't users now, nor does it make sense to pass up the opportunity to develop a trail alongside other development projects.
- **Trail plans should be put in place now to avoid NIMBY ("not in my backyard!") issues later.** It should be made clear where the trails are going to go, even if they're not developed, so that it doesn't become an issue later on when development actually happens.
- **Trails must be patrolled and safe for users once developed.** The county shouldn't develop more trails than it can maintain and patrol for safety.

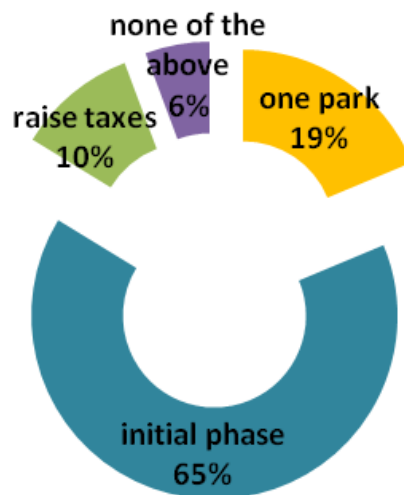
Support for trails was much higher at the trails search area meeting. Given that three of the four meetings focused on parks, this may have impacted the overall results.

#### **4) TIMELINE**

With so many potential development plans on the horizon, Scott County wants to know how quickly residents expect projects to be completed. Participants were asked, “How should development be phased over the next five years?”

- a) Fully develop **one park** and hold off on the development of the other two parks.
- b) Complete an **initial phase** at each of the three parks.
- c) Increase **taxes** further so all three parks can be fully developed within five years.

### **How should development be phased over the next 5 years?**



Participants from the three park-focused meetings answered similarly. However, trails participants indicated nearly a 50/50 split between completing and initial phase and one park.

#### **Complete an Initial Phase at Each Park**

Overwhelmingly, participants elected to complete an initial phase at each of the three parks. The overarching sentiment was summed up by one participant who noted that “a

*“A phase at each park would promote use in general.”*

phase at each park would promote use in general.” They provided several reasons for supporting development of an initial phase at each park.

- **An initial phase allows for users and residents to make decisions about further development later once they’ve had a chance to use the parks and better understand how they use them and would like to use them.** Development shows progress in the parks and trails system, and would help to gain support from increasing users because they would have actual experiences to build their support from, rather than just theoretical ideas and parks plans. Users could then make more informed choices about what they’d like to see in their communities.
- **Each generation can build out a subsequent phase in the parks.** This would allow for the parks to continue to adapt over time to evolving communities and needs.
- **Communal goods like parks and trails can help to build a vibrant community.** Development would help to build healthy community habits, like active living, as well as community pride and cohesiveness.
- **More use may decrease vandalism.** With more people in parks, vandals may be less attracted to the space for fear of being caught. “[Use may] help with maintenance and upkeep and reduce vandalism at each of the parks,” said one participant. Additionally, as parks and trails become points of pride in the community vandals may be less likely to target these communal goods.

### Develop One Park Entirely

Some participants supported a different approach: that one park should be fully developed now. One participant summed up her thought by saying, “If we do develop all three parks, we’ll spread ourselves too thin. Build a nice full park and do a good job with that one.” They noted that fully development would provide its own opportunities and benefits.

- **Provide a variety of recreational opportunities.** It may be difficult to vary amenities and experiences through an initial phase at each park, but full development could provide a range of opportunities.
- **Users could see what full development could offer.** A fully developed park could showcase the possibilities for the other locations than an initial phase might not be able to. Many participants noted “build it and they will come.”
- **Faster and cheaper development.** Parks could likely be developed more quickly one at a time, and benefit from lower construction costs, thereby providing better financial value.
- **Provide lower operations and maintenance costs,** since it’s easier and cheaper to take care of one location. It also may be easier to monitor and protect the site from vandals, from safety, etc. (Note that this is the perspective of participants, and may or may not hold true in reality.)

*“Build it and they will come.”*

## 5) OTHER ISSUES

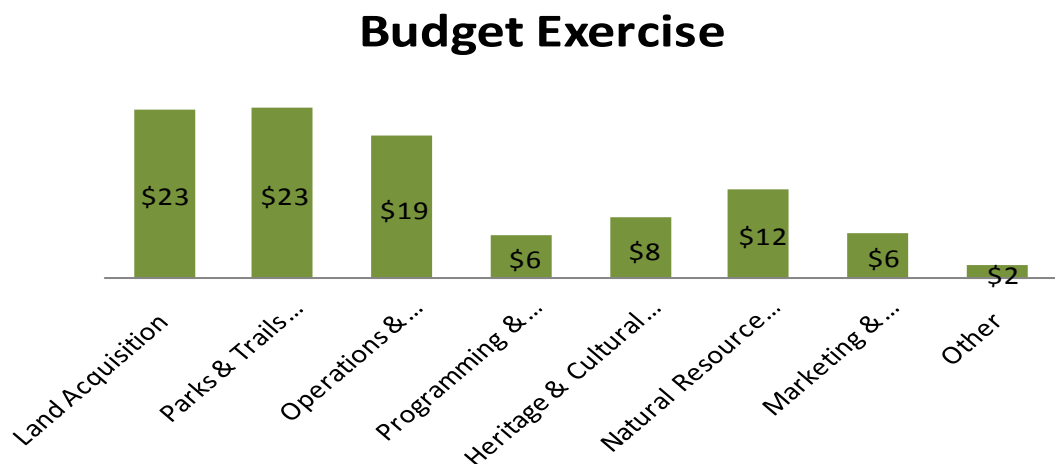
With a potential merger or partnership with Three Rivers Park District on the horizon, many questions arose about what this relationship might look like. At a very high level, residents want to be able to maintain decision-making authority about their parks and trails, particularly when it comes to financial decisions that may impact them individually, but generally were open to the idea if it would help to develop and maintain the parks system more quickly and affordably. It is likely that other questions and issues surrounding this partnership will arise as plans move forward, so the County should be open and transparent about this process.

### Budget Exercise

In addition to the clicker and discussion questions, participants were also asked to complete a budget exercise as a small table. Each table was given \$100 “Scott County dollars” to allocate in various budget categories for a year. Categories included:

- a) Land Acquisition
- b) Parks and Trails Development
- c) Operations & Maintenance
- d) Programming & Events
- e) Heritage & Cultural Preservation
- f) Natural Resource Preservation
- g) Marketing & Promotion
- h) Other

Most of the funds were allocated into the first three categories. It is possible, perhaps, that since these were the *only* topics covered during the presentation and discussion those were





the categories that received the greatest support. The results should be considered with this fact in mind.

Even though the other categories received relatively low amounts, it's important to note that these categories did receive *something* from most tables, which indicates participants' recognition of and desire to fund work across a broad spectrum. Only two of the total 33 tables allocate funds solely in the first three categories.

## Conclusion

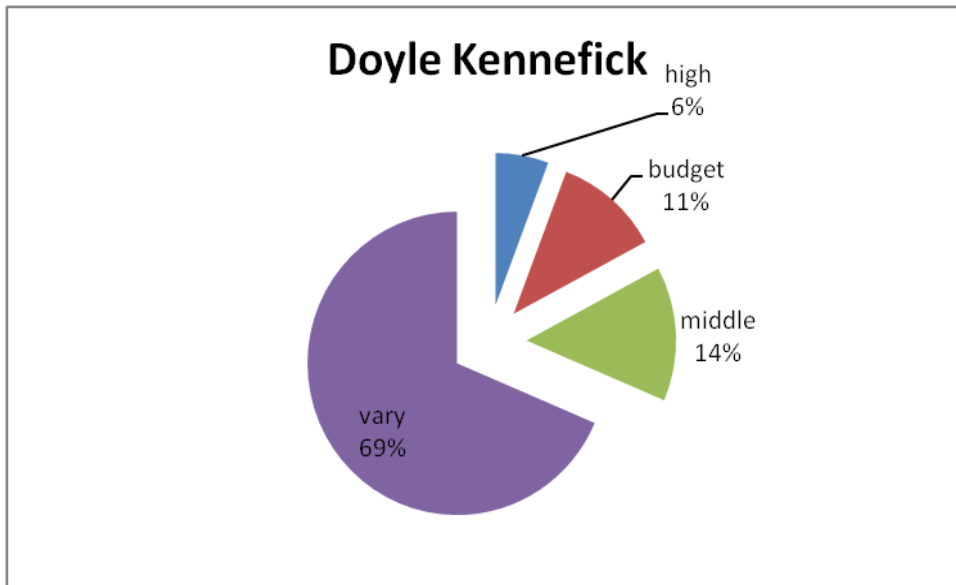
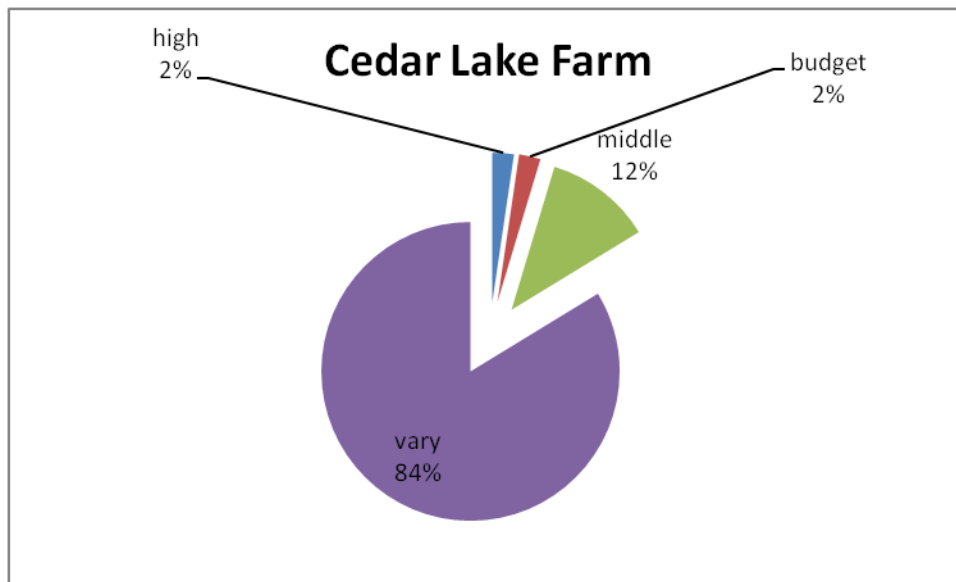
True to the Citizens League experience, participants provided thoughtful, constructive input on the issues posed to them. They spoke passionately about the issues, taking a feeling of ownership over their parks and trails. While a small minority of participants attended the meetings pushing an agenda, the vast majority who showed up participated thoughtfully, listened to their fellow residents, and made many of their choices based upon the best interest of the county and its residents, rather than just themselves as individuals. A number of times during the meetings participants would say during discussion, "I was going to vote for choice A, but then after listening to the conversation at my table, I decided it makes more sense to go with C."

For most of the questions, participants came quickly to a general consensus on the priorities and goals for Scott County's parks and trails. Even on those issues where priorities were less clear, strong themes emerged. Overall, participants provided thoughtful, constructive, and hopefully helpful input on how to move forward with Scott County's parks and trails.

## Appendix: Results from Individual Meetings

*Note: The data below includes only "valid" answer responses. "None of the above" was not listed as an answer choice, though participants were allowed to indicate an "other" vote when concerns arose. Thus, those who answered "other" have been calculated only at the aggregate level, and are not included here.*

### Which best describes the standard of quality you'd like to see?



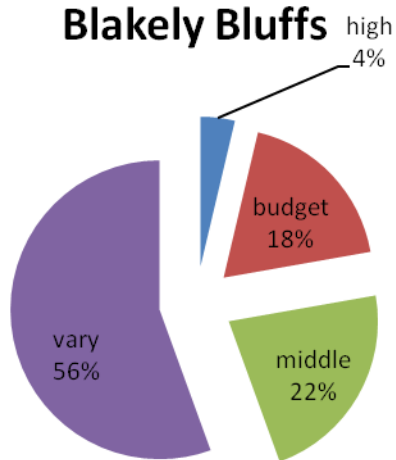
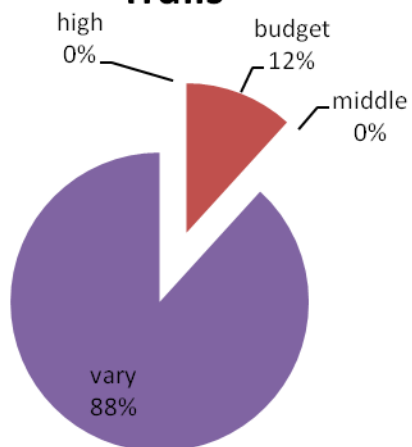
**ATTENDANCE\***

Cedar Lake Farm: 50

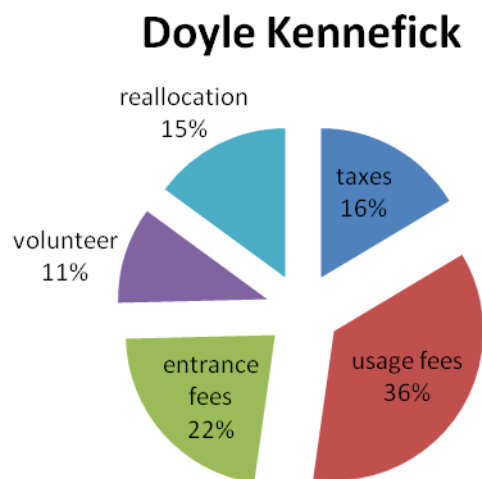
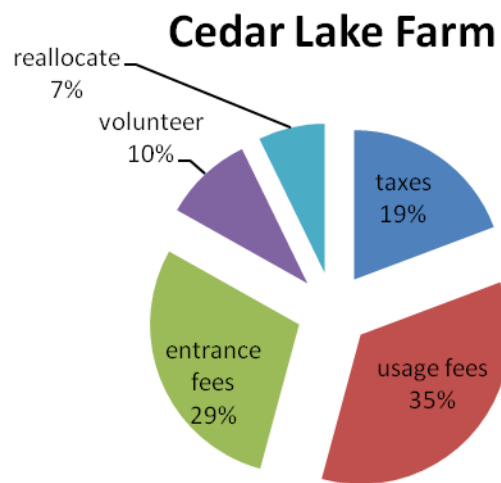
Doyle Kennefick: 40

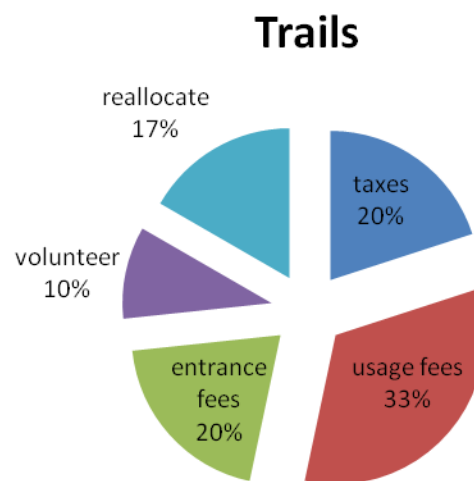
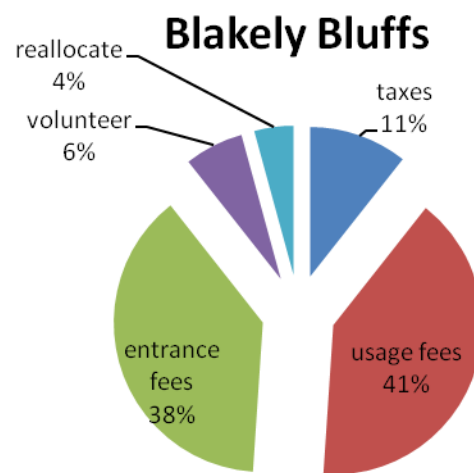
Blakely Bluffs: 30

Trails: 25

*\*numbers are approximate***Blakely Bluffs****Trails**

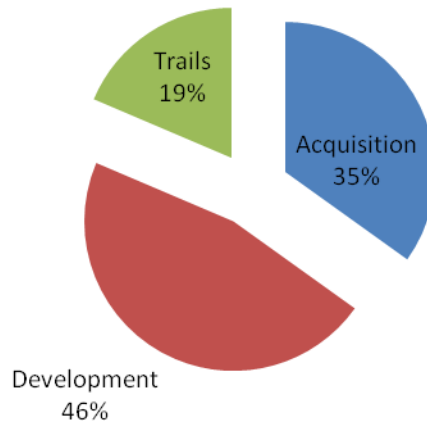
How would you prefer to address additional funding needs?



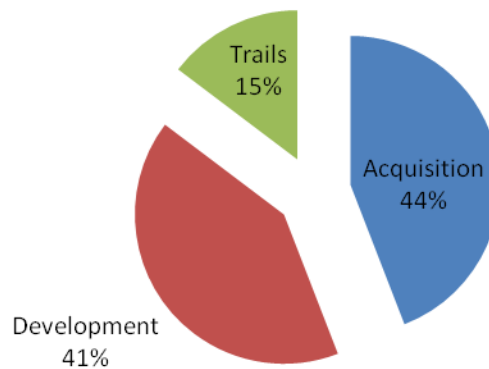


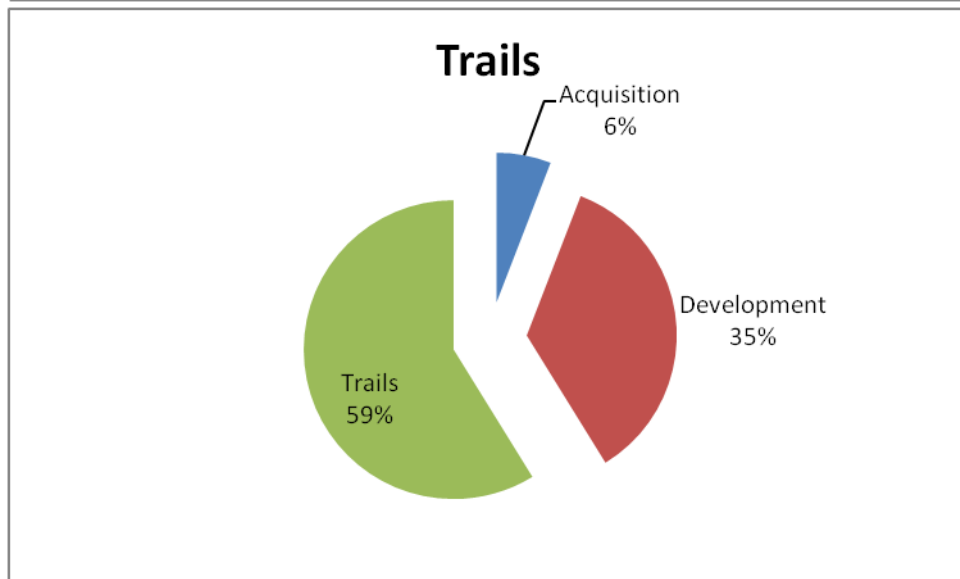
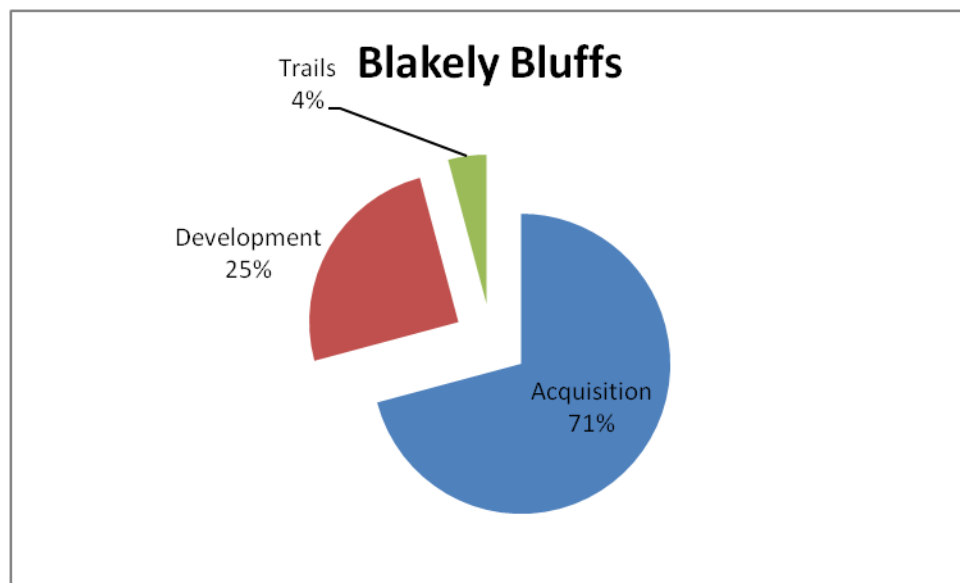
Over the next ten years the primary focus of Scott County parks and trails should be...

**Cedar Lake Farm**

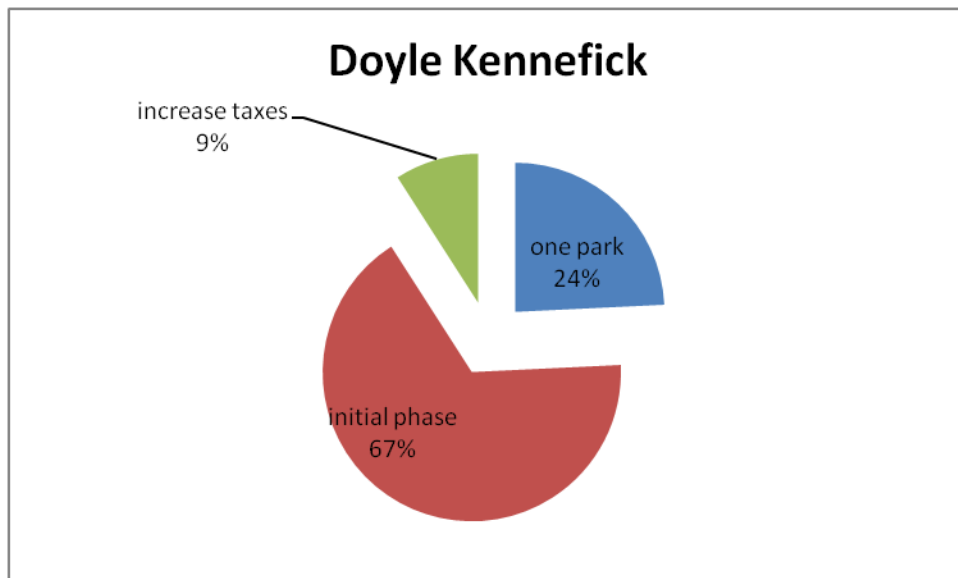
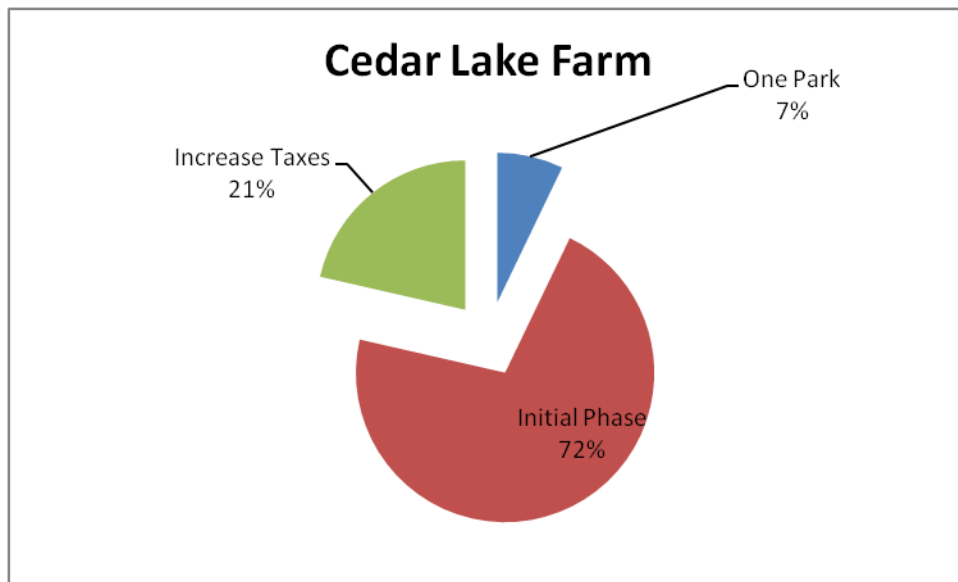


**Doyle Kennefick**

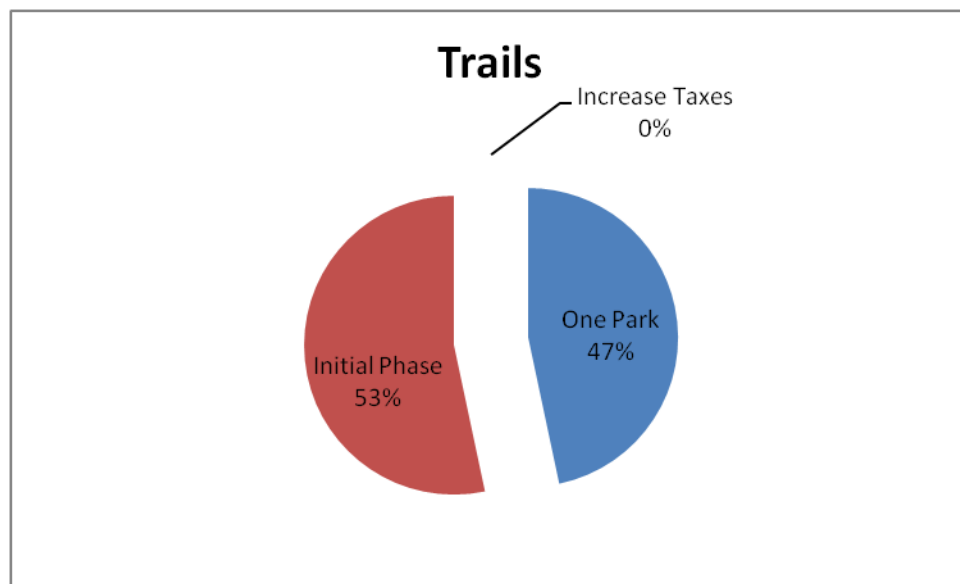
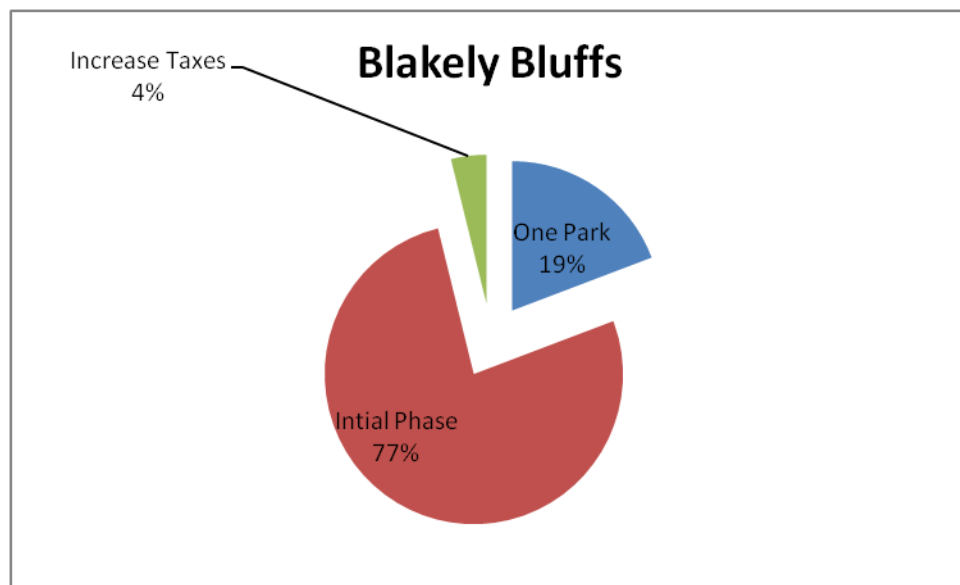




How should development be phased over the next five years?

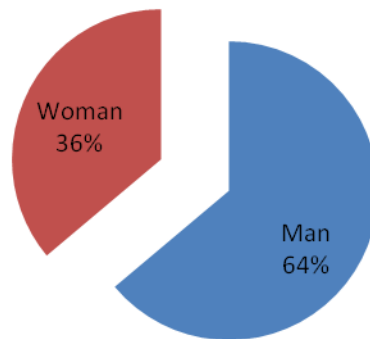




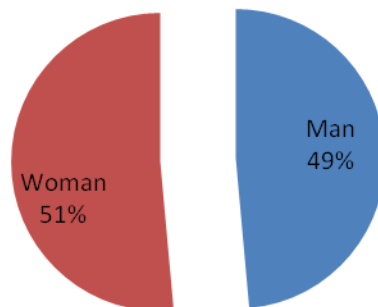


Are you a...

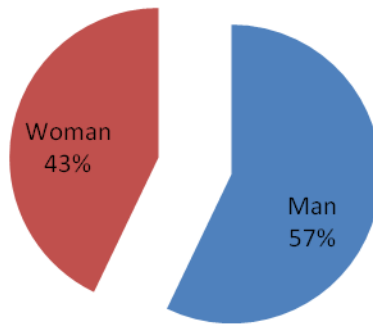
**Cedar Lake Farm**



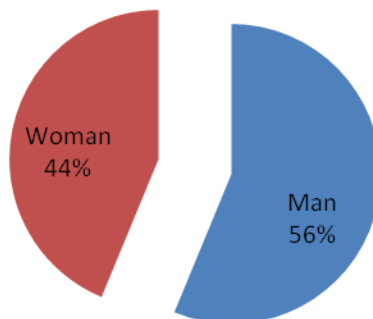
**Doyle Kennefick**



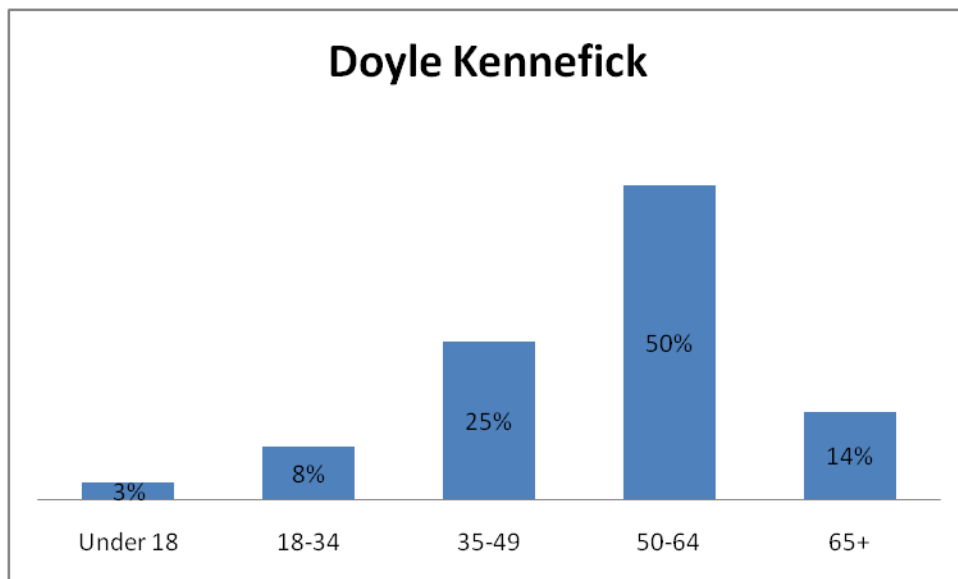
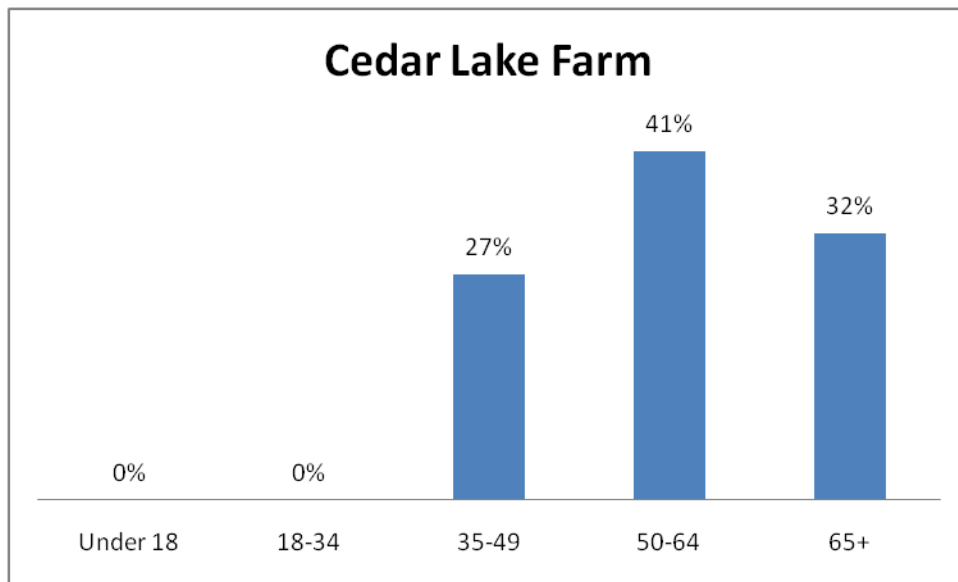
### Blakely Bluffs

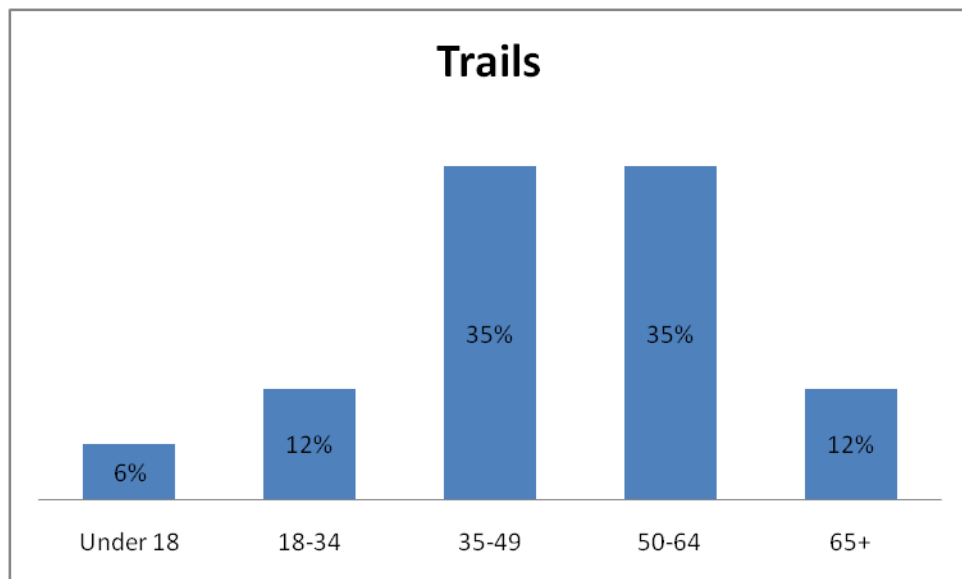
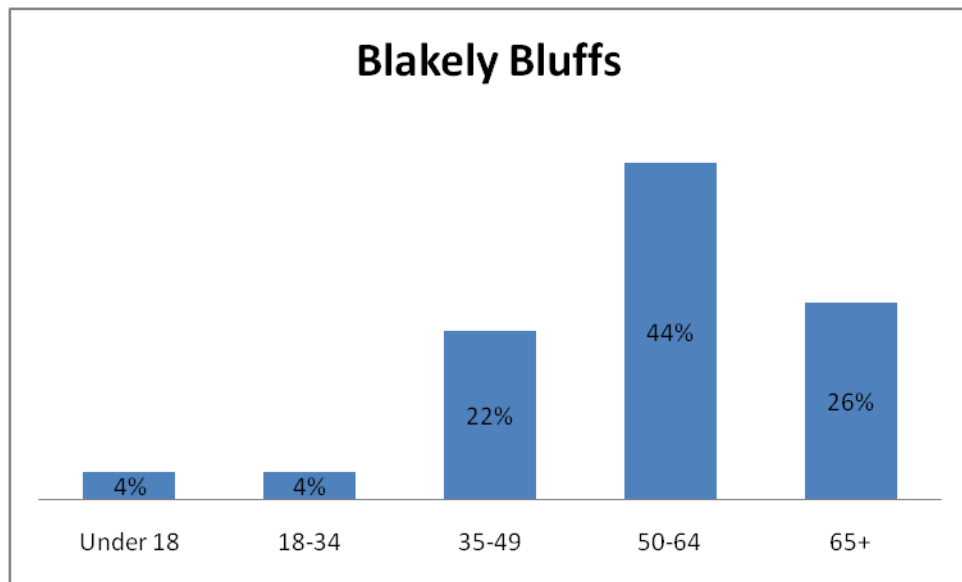


### Trails



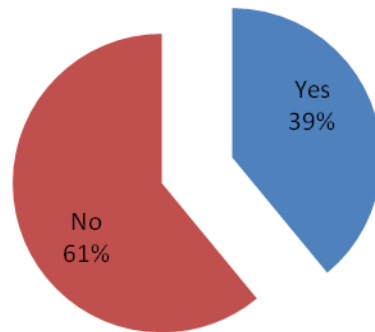
How old are you?



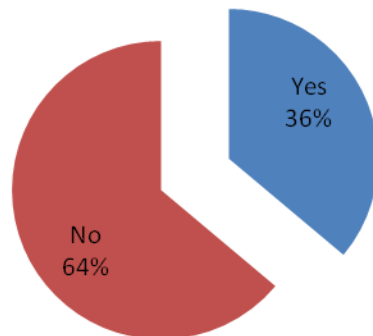


Do you have children under 18 living at home?

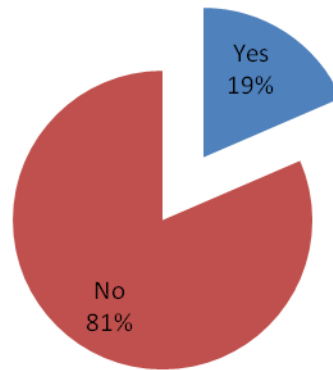
**Cedar Lake Farm**



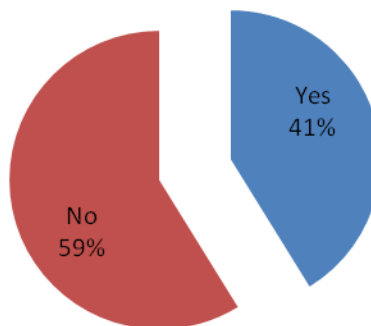
**Doyle Kennefick**



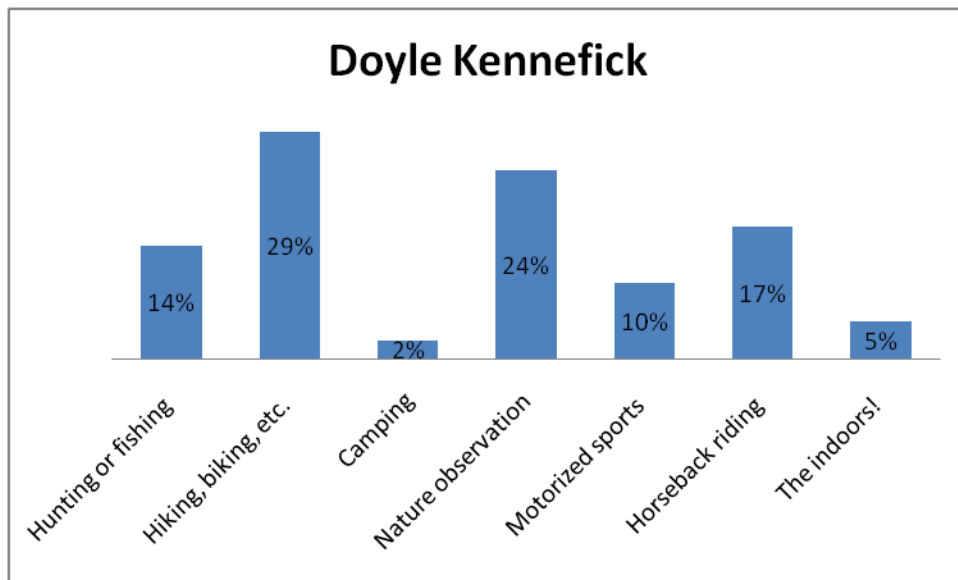
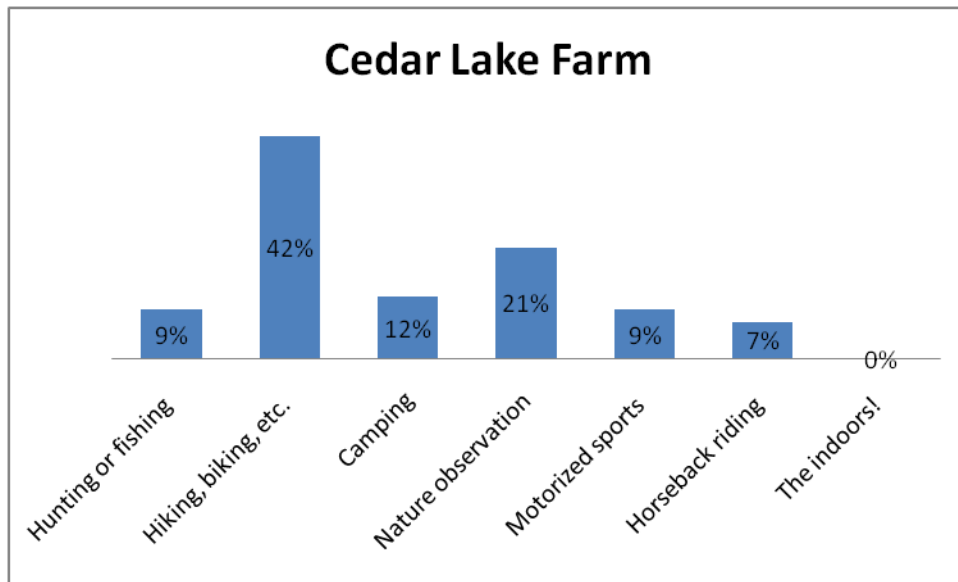
### Blakely Bluffs



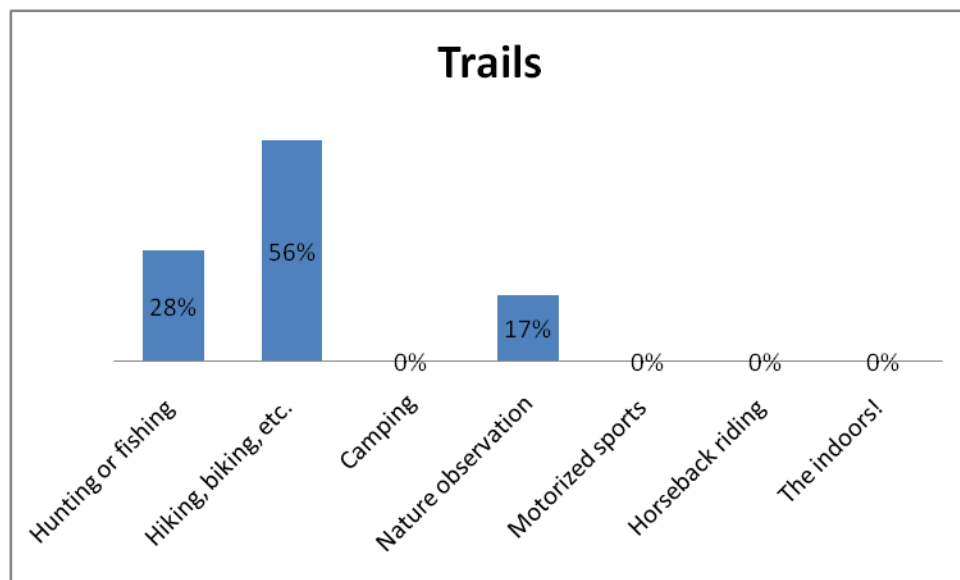
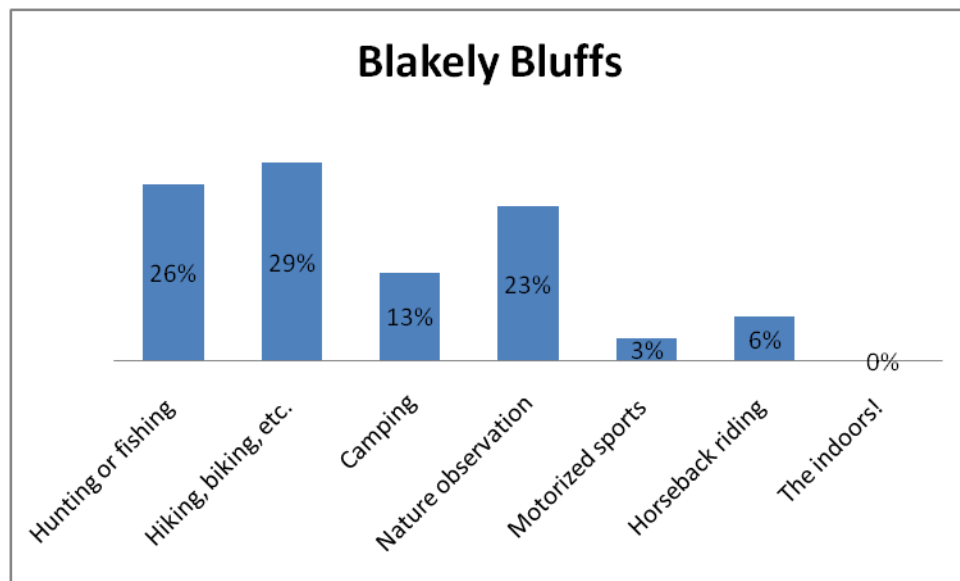
### Trails



What is your favorite outdoor activity?









*Common ground. Common good.*

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